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Robertson stands by his claim of Soviet nuclear arms in Cuba

By Bill Gertz
 and Jeremiah O'Leary
 THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Republican presidential hopeful Pat Robertson continued yesterday to stick by his claim that the Soviet Union has deployed nuclear missiles in Cuba, despite a White House denial and a storm of questions the charge has raised.

"I'm not going to back off from that," Mr. Robertson said of the charge he made Sunday during a television debate. "I'd be happy to have somebody prove me wrong."

He acknowledged, however, that he had seen "no firsthand evidence" to support the claim, which has been challenged by two of Mr. Robertson's political opponents, Vice President George Bush and Rep. Jack Kemp of New York.

Mr. Robertson said the allegation was based on information supplied by a Republican staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and on Feb. 4 testimony to Congress by Adm. William Crowe, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

But in California yesterday, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater issued a statement categorically denying that any Soviet nuclear missiles were deployed on the island 90 miles south of the Florida coast.

Privately, officials said the administration did not want to appear to be trashing what Mr. Robertson said but felt it was important to issue the statement after many queries.

Mr. Bush and Mr. Kemp continued their challenges of the Robertson statement yesterday on the eve of the New Hampshire presidential primary.

"This is a very serious allegation," Mr. Bush said in an interview on a Manchester, N.H., radio station. "You keep hearing these outrageous charges from people, which are designed to scare the American people."

Mr. Kemp labeled Mr. Robertson's charge "rather rash and unsupportable," and said if the former television evangelist had evidence of such missiles, he should share it with the American people.

U.S. military officials discount the possibility that nuclear missiles are in Cuba but admit that, given the limits of verification methods, it is possible for the Soviets to covertly transport strategic weapons to the island.

Mr. Robertson made the charge in criticizing the new U.S.-Soviet intermediate nuclear forces treaty, which would eliminate short- and medium-range missiles from Europe.

He said the Soviets had placed 25 SS-4 and SS-5 medium-range ballistic missiles — among the missiles covered by the INF pact — around Cuba in violation of an agreement between President John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev following the so-called Cuban missile crisis.

Robertson campaign officials later clarified the remarks by saying that the candidate referred to nuclear missile delivery systems and not warheads and that the information was supplied by David S. Sullivan, a GOP staffer with the Foreign Relations Committee.

Mr. Sullivan told The Associated Press that "we do not know whether

nuclear weapons are in Cuba or not" but admitted he referred the Robertson campaign to a Feb. 9 speech by Sen. Jesse Helms, North Carolina Republican, in Concord, N.H.

In the speech, according to Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Helms did not say the Soviets had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, but that they had reneged on a pledge to permit on-site inspection in Cuba after the missile crisis.

Mr. Robertson said the charge also was based on testimony by Adm. Crowe during a Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the INF treaty.

"The SS-4 and SS-5 missile sites established in Cuba between late August and mid-October 1962 were

confirmed as having been destroyed in that year," Mr. Fitzwater said yesterday. "We also are confident that the missiles were removed from Cuba at that time."

The spokesman said the administration has had "extensive intelligence collection" activities aimed at Cuba since 1962 and that there has been "no evidence" of SS-4s, SS-5s or other strategic missiles on the island.

Mr. Helms, ranking GOP member of the Foreign Relations Committee and the leading foe of the INF pact, has charged that the U.S. intelligence community would be unable to determine if Soviet nuclear missiles were re-introduced into Cuba in violation of the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement.

He introduced an amendment to the treaty Feb. 4 that would require U.S. inspections of Cuban military facilities as part of a search for any former SS-4 and SS-5 missile sites in Cuba that were destroyed after the 1962 U.S.-Soviet confrontation.

The Helms amendment was offered following testimony the same day by Adm. Crowe about the U.S. intelligence community's ability to detect Soviet INF missiles in Cuba.

Under questioning by Mr. Helms, Adm. Crowe agreed that the Soviets could transport SS-20 intermediate-range missiles and their launchers into Cuba without U.S. intelligence monitors being able to detect it.

But in the same testimony, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Larry D. Welch, who also directs the Air Force's photographic spy agency, the National Reconnaissance Office, said there was "no place" outside the United States that is monitored more closely than Cuba.

Asked by Mr. Helms if he were certain no SS-4 and SS-5 missiles are in Cuba, Adm. Crowe deferred to Gen. Welch, who answered: "I would say that, yes, I can state that we have high confidence that we know whether or not there are Soviet missiles in Cuba." He declined to comment further in an open Senate session.

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with an earlier Pentagon assessment that the Soviets had violated the Kennedy-Khrushchev accord by sending offensive weapons, intercontinental nuclear bombers and nuclear submarines to Cuba beginning in 1969.

A U.S. official with access to intelligence reporting, who asked not to be identified, told The Washington Times that Soviet strategic weapons "could" be in Cuba now because the complete removal of the 1962 missiles was never verified through on-site inspections.

"We can reach no conclusion on this because of lack of conclusive evidence," the official said.

Also, Cuban and Soviet military workers around Havana were recently observed in the process of enlarging the entrances to several caves that could be used as missile storage depots for SS-20 missiles, the official said.

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